Reviewer's report

Title: Employment Status and Health: Understanding the Health of the Economically Inactive Population in Scotland.

Version: 1 Date: 27 January 2012

Reviewer: Paula Holland

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This paper focuses on an interesting and important area of research, given the increasingly large proportion of people outside of the labour market and the current economic climate which is compounding this problem.

Discretionary revisions

1. Page 15: The authors acknowledge that some respondents looking after home and family will have made the choice to do so while others will be in that group by necessity. This is an important distinction and emphasises the considerable heterogeneity of this group in terms of their own health status and that of their family, and their economic position. For those who have made a decision not to work and to care for the home/family their employment status is (to some degree) within their control. The concept of control has been shown to be important to health, particularly mental health. The authors should consider the concept of control in their discussion of the findings, particularly given that the LAHF had better mental health than other EI groups.

2. The authors found interesting differences in smoking and alcohol use. The permanently sick and LAHF were more likely to be smokers than the employed group but less likely to drink heavily. Do the authors have any thoughts as to why this might be the case?

3. More discussion of the policy implications of the poor health and low levels of education found among the LAHF (some of whom will be raising children) would be welcome. Members of this group who do not claim welfare benefits are not obliged to engage with welfare/ back to work schemes. While some may not wish to work (indicated by their not identifying themselves as unemployed) improving their health, education and skills needs consideration, as they have bearing on the important role of educating and maintaining the health of their own children.

Minor essential revisions.

1. The wording of the first line of the ‘Background’ gives the impression that the following paragraphs are going to discuss the literature on the role of poor health as a risk factor for unemployment, rather than as a consequence of it. Poor health may lead to unemployment, unemployment may lead to poor health, and both pathways should be briefly acknowledged here.
2. Page 6, para 1: wording here should be clearer: “...both mortality and limiting long-standing illness were best amongst those in work...”. Presumably ‘best’ means lowest?

3. Page 6, para 2: the word ‘studies’ in the following sentence needs deleting: “...maternity-leave category was not significantly different to moving to unemployment, retirement or studies (27)).

Major compulsory revisions.

1. More explanation of the deprivation variable is needed. At what level is this measured? Ward level, or smaller?

2. The authors do not discuss the limitations of the data. For example, the LAFH group are predominantly women and the authors state that they may be financially secure (p15) yet even within the LAFH there is likely to be considerable heterogeneity; we do not know anything about their marital/partnership status or their domestic arrangements and some may be lone parents unable to work because they cannot afford childcare costs, others may be supported by partners earning enough to make their involvement in the labour market unnecessary.

Another limitation of the data which should be acknowledged is that the data predate the recent recession, so that the size of the EI group is likely to be larger now, and their health status poorer, as recessions increase health-selection into and out of the labour market. Moreover, these changes are likely to affect more pe

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

'I declare that I have no competing interests'.